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Susana Maria Jiménez-Placer

The Mammy Image: Between the Old South and the New South

1 The idealization of the South started before the Civil War, but it was after the Reconstruction period that the past of this region of the United States acquired a mythical status: according to Grace Elizabeth Hale in her book *Making Whiteness: The Culture of Segregation in the South, 1890-1940*, "not until the federal government had repudiated Reconstruction and repealed the Civil Rights Act did the plantation past become for many whites a time and space of pleasure and escape, the 'Old' South understood as 'a golden age of perfect race, class, and gender harmony'" (52-53). The term "Old South" refers to an idealized, pastoral version of the antebellum South, represented as a land of prosperous plantations inhabited by honest gentlemen, elegant belles, virtuous ladies and happy slaves, who were grateful and faithful to their masters in exchange for the latter's care and protection. Prominent among these faithful slaves was the figure of "mammy," a popular cartoonish representation of African American women between the 1820s and the mid twentieth century.

2 According to Kimberly Wallace-Sanders, the term mammy goes back as early as the 1810s, when it referred to African American women taking care of white children, but its association with a series of stereotypical features was not prominent in literature until the mid-nineteenth century, more or less coinciding with the publication of Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852:

> I define the standard, most recognizable mammy character as a creative combination of extreme behavior and exaggerated features. Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence [...] and a strict disciplinarian at the same time. First as slave, then as a free woman, the mammy is largely associated with the care of white children or depicted with noticeable attachment to white children. Her unprecedented devotion to her white family reflects her racial inferiority. *Mammy* is often both her title and the only name she has ever been given. She may also be a cook or personal maid to her mistress—a classic Southern belle—whom she infantilizes. Her clothes are typical of a domestic [...] Her own children are usually dirty and ill-mannered [...] She is typically depicted as impatient or brusque [...] with her own children, in contrast to her lavish, affectionate patience for her white charges. Mammy wields considerable authority within the plantation household and consequently retains a measure of dubious, unreliable respect in the slave quarters. (Wallace-Sanders 5-6)

3 In the 1890s, just a few decades after the publication of Stowe's novel, these features were popularized through the trademark image of Aunt Jemima, introduced by Nancy Green, "a fifty-nine-year-old servant for a Chicago judge" (Manring 75), at the World's Columbian Exposition of May-November 1893 in Chicago.[1]

4 The mammy image became an essential ingredient in what Hale calls "the fiction of continuity," which characterized the New South after the Reconstruction period: according to her "images of integrated domesticity were central to this fiction of continuity as African American servants, symbolized and idealized most frequently as mammy, replaced slaves" (87). Thus, although at that time the domestic space was a site of drastic changes as a consequence of the gradual replacement of the old traditional plantation households by the homes of a new white middle class in the South,[2] the presence of African American domestics in the kitchens of the new white homes kept the illusion or "representation of continuity between old and new" alive in the New South (Hale 93). Ironically, while racial segregation was rampant in the Southern public space, the domestic space became "an island of racial mixing" (Hale 87), where interaction between white housewives and children on the one hand, and their African American domestics on the other, was allowed, expected and to a certain extent welcomed as a recreation of the past.

5 In order to keep the illusion of continuity alive, black domestics were expected to perform the role of loving mammies devoted to their white families regardless of exploitive work conditions. According to Rebecca Sharpless, "White people expected certain highly prescribed behaviors from their African American employees" (134), and African American employees felt compelled to fulfill these expectations. As Micky McElya states, "Black domestic workers [...] faced a white popular culture that persistently conflated or compared their work and their lives with the fictitious mammy figure" (208). McElya goes even further to conclude that "the continuing effects of both racial slavery and popular historical memory shaped twentieth-century domestic work" (209) in such a pervasive way that it also spread north: "the long-standing national romance with the plantation idyll and its narrative of the faithful slave also shaped the desires and expectations of white employers outside the South who hired recently migrated black women" (214).

6 Although the mammy image was shaped primordially by the expectations and demands of the white people's imagination and its popularity reached a peak in the first decades of the twentieth century, its origin is found not so much in the experiences of actual

slave women—who were called mammies—as in the combination of the workings of the whites' imagination and the black slaves' strategies for survival. According to Hale,

> white-crafted representations of slave and ex-slave identity were not, especially in the antebellum South, created in isolation. Instead, in a dangerous dialectic, slaves constructed masks of simplemindedness and sycophancy, loyalty and laziness to play to their owners' fantasies and desires while securing very material benefits—more food and movement, less work and control—in return. (16)

7 She goes on to assert that "The problem was that these 'play things,' these masks [...] became the reality of black existence for most white Americans" (17). The mammy image constituted one of these masks, probably the most popular one for African American women, although as Hale specifies "Southern whites in particular missed the performance, and usually confused slave and ex-slave masks with black selves" (17).

8 The confusion between black masks and black selves is evident in many of the literary works written by white writers in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the case of the mammy mask, this confusion may even account for the historical, critical and literary disregard which according to Wallace-Sanders has affected the treatment of the black mammies' biological experience of motherhood (5, 7). The adoption of the mammy image demanded from black women an almost complete devotion to their white charges, which left them with little energy, space and time for their own children. For this reason, in the Southern imagination, mammies were childless or they seemed to be so, given the invisibility of their own children. Thus the mask of the black mammy was designed to cover up both the self of the black woman and that of the black mother.

9 One of the central tasks assigned to black mammies in the Old South was the transmission and promotion of white supremacist values and the white social order. In her article "The Black Mammy in the Plantation Household" published in the *Journal of Negro History* in 1938, Jessie W. Packhurst "defined the accomplishments of the mammy as enforcing the master's rules, helping the other slaves to follow them, and minimizing punishment when they were broken. The mammy taught white children when to speak and not to speak, how to dress and eat, and told black children what whites expected of them" (qtd. in Manring 31). As the embodiment of "the fiction of continuity between the Old South and the new Southern world" (Hale 101), the black mammy was supposed to perform a similar role in the context of the New South: thus she was expected to respect and even actively support and promote white supremacist attitudes which defined segregation as the new Southern racial order (Hale 102). The mere presence of a black mammy made a white home "a central site for the production and reproduction of racial identity precisely because it remained a space of integration within an increasingly segregated world" (Hale 94). As a result, it was at home that white children began to learn the meaning of race and to absorb the ideology of white supremacy and black inferiority.

10 Within the context of the New South, most Southern whites adopted a sentimental, conformist and uncritical attitude when remembering and reviewing their own childhood process of learning the meaning of race at home (Hale 98, 104). Since race awareness was usually prompted by contact with a black domestic, African-American domestic workers fell victim to whites' sentimentality and were remembered unrealistically as stereotypical mammies. According to Hale, "For most middle-class white Southerners [mammy] taught them to be themselves, an identity as white that gained its power in part through the unself-consciousness with which it was held. Their

conception of the naturalness of their own racial identities blinded them to the contradictions of learning whiteness [...] from black women" (104).

11 In contrast, a few white Southerners showed a less conformist reaction to the racial lessons which they were supposed to learn at home: Hale mentions passages from the fiction and memoirs of writers such as Sara Haardt, Ellen Glasgow, Katharine Du Pre Lumpkin, and especially Lillian Smith, where they recall "the home-centered scenes in which their racial epiphanies occurred" (94) under a more critical light than offered by their contemporaries. Here the writers focus on the disturbing effects of "their racial epiphanies" as enlightening moments which eventually helped them open their eyes not only "to the contradictions of learning whiteness [...] from black women," but also to the injustice fueled by the racist discrimination and segregation of the New South. According to popular sentimental accounts, the black mammy's contribution to the process of making ladies out of white girls was essential; in the more critical accounts black domestics are usually seen as influential companions for white girls who do not fit the stereotypical image of Southern femininity, white girls who, for this reason, are characterized as tomboys.

12 According to Constante González Groba, tomboyism usually implies a redefinition of traditional gender roles and established white supremacist notions: as González Groba suggests, in order to question not only traditional gender expectations and heterosexuality itself, but also the monolithic construction of whiteness white tomboys are usually conveniently associated with the non-white (280). As a consequence of segregation everywhere, except in the white homes, this non-white element is often provided by an African American domestic. Susan Tucker corroborates this point when in her presentation of testimonies of black and white Southern women she concludes that "white girls, as they grew up, did draw from black women many of their learned behaviors. This was particularly true among those white women who felt most keenly the social changes concerning the roles of women in recent years" (132). These white girls were thus exposed not only to the contradictions of the mask of white femininity which they had to wear, but also to the artificiality of the color line and the mammy mask which their black domestics were forced to wear in front of the white world.

13 Within the context of Southern short fiction, one of the most prominent examples of the conflicted white girl is provided by Katherine Anne Porter's literary alter ego: Miranda. Much has been said about the influence of Grandmother, Sophia Jane, on Miranda's development, while the relationship between this white girl and her black mammy, Aunt Nannie, has received comparatively scarce critical attention, in spite of the fact that, as Tucker states, "Katherine Anne Porter, in 'The Last Leaf,' is one of the few white writers who shows a black domestic growing very old and tired" (107).[3] "The Old Order" focuses on Miranda's growing up and her confrontation with several aspects of human nature; therefore, Porter's relative originality in her treatment of Aunt Nannie suggests an interest in underlining the role that this black character plays in Miranda's development.[4]

"The Faithful Old Servant Nannie": Blackness between Brackets

14 In "The Old Order," Miranda's Grandmother is identified as "The Source," the origin of the family order and the protector of the old white code of behavior to be passed on to

the younger generations, although in "The Journey" her role as guardian of the old order depends on her ability to conceal her own youthful misgivings about the demands of Southern ladyhood. In contrast with Grandmother's definition as "The Source," Aunt Nannie is "The Last Leaf" in her old age, the last vestige of the old order: her attitude in this sketch brings to the fore the instability of the white code and of the myth of the Old South, although in her case the end of the old order is not portrayed as a catastrophe but as the promise of a more genuine future. Thus, Aunt Nannie eventually triumphs where Grandmother failed: in contrast with Grandmother, who despite her misgivings never completely liberates herself from the gender constraints of the Southern order, Aunt Nannie eventually liberates herself from its gender and racial constraints.

15 In "The Journey," we learn that as a child, Aunt Nannie was purchased at bargain price by Sophia Jane's father, who eventually gave her as a gift to his young spoiled daughter. As Hardy has observed, from this moment onwards Aunt Nannie's development in "The Old Order" is parallel to that of Miranda's grandmother until the latter's death (40): when they were children they were playmates; when Sophia Jane got married Aunt Nannie was married off to another slave; then both of them started their "terrible race of procreation" (*CS* 334);[5] and when they were old, they spent most of their time together taking care of their grandchildren and talking about the old times. Sophia Jane and Aunt Nannie's friendship is such that in their old age they hope they will be allowed to share their afterlife in heaven.

16 Throughout Sophia Jane's life Nannie behaves as a faithful mate and servant, and Sophia Jane as a kind, sympathetic mistress: if "Grandmother's rôle was authority," Aunt Nannie "had all her life obeyed the authority nearest to her" (*CS* 328). At first sight, their relationship is one of perfect harmony, thus symbolizing the balance and stability characterizing the paternalism that supposedly ruled race relationships in the Old South. But far from offering a sentimental account, Porter's story often hints at the high price Aunt Nannie has more or less consciously paid for such a friendship. In spite of the benevolent and friendly treatment she has apparently received from her mistress, the degrading conditions that black women were forced to experience is obvious: Aunt Nannie served twice as a gift for Sophia Jane, first after having suffered the traumatic and dehumanizing experience of being purchased by Sophia Jane's father, and then after having been married off for the sole purpose of being given as a wedding present to her mistress; from an early age she had felt she was lucky to live in the white house, but this meant her separation from her parents who were field hands and lived in the slave quarters; and in contrast with Sophia Jane, who in her old age "could still point to nine of her" eleven children, Nannie had given birth to thirteen children, but had lost ten of them.

17 Most of these hardships are treated in Porter's story in a misleading matter-of-fact way, probably to suggest a generalized passivity and the self-deception in race relations from which at least part of Southern society suffered: the paternalistic distortion was so pervasive that, according to Sally McMillen, during the Civil War many Southern ladies were shocked to discover that slaves did not like slavery and servitude (148). In Porter's story this paternalistic misconception distorts Nannie's self-image to the extent that even in her old age she seems to feel as grateful to the white family as she felt at the beginning of her relationship with Sophia Jane: "A good worming had cured Nannie's potbelly, she thrived on plentiful food and a species of kindness not so

indulgent, maybe, as that given to puppies; still it more than fulfilled her notions of good fortune" (*CS* 332). This is probably the reason why, although "Emancipation seemed to set right a wrong that stuck in her heart like a thorn" (*CS* 336), and although she could not understand the reason "why God, Whom she loved, had seen fit to be so hard on a whole race because they had got a certain kind of skin" (*CS* 336), her attitude during Grandmother's life is not resentful. Nannie simply accepts her lot without worrying about the injustice, prejudice and abuse which it conveys: "Old Nannie had no ideas at all as to her place in the world. It had been assigned to her before birth" (*CS* 328).

18 Nannie's "notions of good fortune," her consequent lack of resentment and her conformist attitude make her a perfect candidate to wear the mask of a faithful mammy, and this is what she does for most of her life until Grandmother's death. Nannie's adoption of this role starts early when as a child Sophia Jane inscribes her name in the family Bible, thus symbolically ratifying her inscription in the white order and her adoption of a place within this established order. Significantly, the entry written by Sophia Jane is "Nannie Gay .... (black)" (*CS* 329), suggesting that although Nannie's place in the white world will be conditioned by her being black, her role will require the suspension of a part of her true self: her blackness. Fitting into the white world forces Nannie to perform a black role and wear a black mask designed by whites. It is paradoxically meant to keep her blackness between brackets, thus symbolically concealing and limiting the range of possibilities of her self as a black woman.

Blackness Rediscovered: "The Faithful Old Servant Nannie" Becomes "an Aged Bantu Woman"

19 Nannie's conformism and lack of resentment suggests that she is not aware of the restrictions her mammy role puts on her racial identity until Grandmother, her sponsor in the white order, dies and symbolically liberates her. Therefore, in "The Last Leaf," after Grandmother's death announces the imminent collapse of the white order, Nannie is given the chance to discover the blackness without brackets which Porter overtly associates with her ancestral African past when she describes Nannie in her old age as "an aged Bantu woman" and compares her face with an all-black "eyeless mask" (*CS* 349) reminiscent of the African masks.

20 At first sight in "The Last Leaf" Porter suggests that Nannie's end of life discovery of her all-black Bantu identity functions as a rebuke to the white children's image of her as "the faithful old servant Nannie," "a real member of the family, perfectly happy with them" (*CS* 349). But Porter does not seem to be completely satisfied with this simplistic definition of Nannie's new liberated self merely in terms of her black ancestral past, and adds information about how "now and then" Nannie chooses to wear her old mammy mask and perform her mammy role in the white house of the white family: on these occasions "She would again for a moment be the amiable, dependent, like-one-of-the-family old servant" (*CS* 350). This seems to be how Nannie manages to reconcile her past at the service of the white order and of her new black self reminiscent of her ancestral African past. Thus what Porter suggests in "The Last Leaf" is in accordance with the conclusion she reaches at the end of "Old Mortality" when she describes Miranda's attitude with the words "her hopefulness, her ignorance" (CS 221) to discredit the white girl's determination to build a new self and a new life totally

independent from her family and her family past. Similarly in "The Last Leaf" Porter does not seem comfortable presenting Nannie's liberated self simply as that of an aged Bantu woman. She suggests that Nannie's true self can never depend on the utter erasure of her personal past. Nannie needs a self that can integrate her past life immersed in the white old order and her ancestral African past; the black mask designed by whites and her new black face "like an eyeless mask"; her old identity as "the faithful old servant Nannie, a freed slave," and her new identity as "an aged Bantu woman of independent means" (*CS* 349). Nannie's dilemma somehow condenses that experienced by many African Americans whose attempts to give voice to this conflict by resorting to artistic, literary, political or social means reached a peak during the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s and the Civil Rights Movement in the 1950s and 1960s.

21 Porter's sketch was published in January 1935 and probably written in 1933 or 1934 (DeMouy 207), when the artists and intellectuals of the Harlem Renaissance were already addressing central issues concerning the question of African American identity. In the South, segregation was still the law, the Civil Rights Movement was relatively far away in the horizon, and Martin Luther King had not dreamt his dream of freedom and racial integration yet. For a white Southern writer like Porter, the elaboration of a solution for Nannie's dilemma was probably too difficult a task... Her final proposal fails to perfectly integrate Aunt Nannie's two selves, though it reconciles them by allowing her to choose freely. After Grandmother's death Nannie is an aged Bantu woman who occasionally chooses to rely upon her mammy mask to evince that her life as mammy was and still is indispensable for the white family, and to denounce the white family's laziness as well as the lack of effectivity of the white order when deprived of the work provided by her in her mammy role. Now Nannie is free to wear her mask when she chooses to and she is aware that she is wearing it.

22 To reinforce this complexity, the narrator reminds us in the last two paragraphs of the old days and recalls Nannie's vindication of the authority associated with her mammy role whenever Harry, Miranda's father, "stood out against her word in some petty dispute" (*CS* 351). Nannie's attitude as well as Harry's reaction suggest to what extent the black woman and her former white charge had interiorized the conventions that ruled their black mammy-white child relationship. The conventionality and artificiality at the basis of their relationship are underlined by the fact that in the past, when Nannie vindicated her authority, she did so on the grounds that Harry had fed at her breasts though he "knew this was not literally true" (*CS* 351) and both had assumed their roles to the extent that what was literally true had become secondary. This emphasizes the artifice surrounding the mammy mask and gives us a glimpse of Nannie's taking advantage of her role.

The Reaction of Miranda's Family

23 Harry's daughter, Miranda, is one of the white children that witness the collapse of the old order when Grandmother dies and Nannie leaves the white house to live in "a little cabin across the narrow creek" (*CS* 348). Although it is her elder sister Maria that "years afterward [...] thought with a pang, they had not really been so very nice to Aunt Nannie" (*CS* 348), we suspect that Miranda, like the other children, is also chastened by

Aunt Nannie's attitude after Grandmother's death, and that like the rest of the family she is "surprised, a little wounded," and even

> astonish[ed] to discover that Nannie had always liked and hoped to own certain things, she had seem so contented and wantless. She moved away, and as the children said afterwards to each other, it was almost funny and certainly very sweet to see how she tried not to be too happy the day she left, but they felt rather put upon, just the same. (*CS* 349)

24 The reaction of Miranda's family suggests the same blindness and self-deception affecting Southerners who, during the Civil War, were shocked to discover that their slaves did not like slavery, as mentioned above. Nannie's new attitude functions as a symbolic crack in her mammy mask, which causes mental confusion and mixed feelings in Miranda and the other children as they are suddenly exposed to the fragility of the race relationships that they had taken for granted. Nannie's crack functions as a fracture that offers them a glimpse of the artificiality of the old order, and as a destabilizing force uprooting the ideological system which until now had provided stability to their lives: the ideology of white male supremacy disguised as paternalism.

25 The mental and ideological confusion caused by Nannie's attitude and its destabilizing power finds expression in the symbolic collapse of the domestic order after she leaves:

> They [the children] missed Nannie every day. As their fortunes went down, and they had very few servants, they needed her terribly. They realized how much the old woman had done for them, simply by seeing how, almost immediately after she went, everything slackened, lost tone, went off edge. Work did not accomplish itself as it once had. (*CS* 349-50)

26 Miranda and the other children are forced to realize to what extent the white order had depended literally, as well as symbolically, on Nannie's performance. By wearing her mammy mask and assuming her identity as "(black)," Nannie had contributed to the perpetuation not only of the domestic but also of the ideological order of her white family. From her position as a "(black)" mammy within the domestic sphere, she had actively participated in the promotion of the ideology of the white supremacy, especially among children, and as a consequence her new old age attitude as "an aged Bantu woman" brings to the fore the existence of contradictions and inconsistencies in this same ideology. From this perspective, although Porter's work focuses on questions of gender rather than race, it displays a racial awareness reminiscent of that which Hale discerns in the works of Katherine Du Pre Lumpkin or Lillian Smith (94).

27 Although Porter does not develop this theme further and there is not a clear experience we may classify as a racial epiphany for Miranda in "The Old Order," it is clear that Aunt Nannie lives long enough to be a living lesson on race and race relationships especially for children. Nannie's occasional visits to the home of the white family and the temporary recovery of her mammy role give the white children like Miranda a last glimpse of the old order and its paternalistic conception of race relationships. Nevertheless, the visits are depicted as fleeting moments, as extraordinary events purposely designed to highlight their contrast with the more permanent state of present decay and chaos. As a result, these extraordinary moments seem to convey a transitionary and illusory quality that suggests both the anachronism and the artificial character of the old racial harmony which they supposedly recreate. Moreover, Nannie's temporary adoption of her mammy mask during these visits repeatedly exposes the children to the distance that separates Nannie the "(black)" mammy and Nannie the independent black woman, thus casting serious doubt on the

reality and genuineness of both these moments and the old days they recreate. Ironically, in these visits, it is Nannie that treats the white family with condescension and a bit of paternalism.

Aunt Nannie's Contribution to Miranda's Tomboyism

28 As suggested above, in "The Last Leaf," there is no racial epiphany for Miranda, who is not even mentioned in this sketch—she is just one of the children—, but her reaction to Uncle Jimbilly's dramatic account of slavery in "The Witness" suggests that, for her, Nannie's racial lesson does not fall on deaf ears: when Uncle Jimbilly tells the children about the cruelty of slavery, "Paul would have changed the subject, but Miranda, the little quick one, wanted *to know* the worst" (*CS* 342; emphasis added). Paul's evasive attitude and his attempt to conceal and ignore the evidence are in tune with the demands of the established order and recreate the paternalistic artifice that surrounded race relationships in the South. In "The Grave," he shows a similar attitude when he forces Miranda not to tell anybody about a she-rabbit, but this time his anxiety concerns the artifice surrounding gender rather than race relationships. In contrast with Paul, in "The Witness," "The Grave" and "The Fig Tree" Miranda is repeatedly portrayed as an alert girl whose first impulse is to see—as her name suggests —, to learn, to know. In "The Circus," Porter shows how Miranda's perceptive acuteness threatens to alienate her from the rest of the family. This attitude makes us suspect her readiness to at least intuit Aunt Nannie's lesson in "The Last Leaf."

29 Aunt Nannie's leaving and Grandmother's death destabilize Miranda and the other children's process of growing up: "They [the children] were growing up, times were changing, the old world was sliding from under their feet, they had not yet laid hold of the new one" (*CS* 349). The absence of their grandmother and their mammy makes the children's personal progress from childhood to adulthood unstable both literally and symbolically: literally because Sophia Jane, as their grandmother, and Aunt Nannie, as their mammy, had been in charge of rearing them and indoctrinating them with the ideology of the old order, and symbolically because the two women's absence announces the loss of two essential pillars in the old patriarchal order, the white lady-mother, and its complement, the black mammy. "The Witness" and "The Last Leaf" are mainly concerned with the effects of these historical changes on race conceptions and race relations: as a consequence of their exposition to Uncle Jimbilly's accounts of the cruelty of slavery and to Aunt Nannie's development in her old age, the children become witnesses to the change from slavery to emancipation; their growing process from innocence/ignorance to knowledge gets tinged with racial overtones especially for Miranda, since she is the one who demands knowledge of "the worst" more actively. These two sketches are designed mainly—although not exclusively—to shake the children's race awareness and contribute to the delineation of their identity as whites.

30 In contrast, the last two sections of "The Old Order," "The Fig Tree" and "The Grave," focus on Miranda and on the effects of the historical changes on her. Her characterization as a tomboy at the beginning of "The Grave" is highly significant since it announces that her gender identity is at stake:

> She was wearing her summer roughing outfit: dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man's straw hat, and thick brown sandals. Her brother had the same outfit except his was a sober hickory-nut color. Ordinarily Miranda preferred her overalls to any other dress, though it was making rather a scandal in the countryside, for

> the year was 1903, and in the back country the law of female decorum had teethin it. (*CS* 364)

31 After Grandmother's death, Aunt Nannie gets rid of the mammy mask, and similarly Miranda gets rid of her own mask, the one designed for white girls immersed in the process of becoming Southern ladies. Liberated from the mask that defined femininity in the South, Miranda truly becomes a tomboy. In "The Grave," deprived of the white female model that her Grandmother represented, Miranda enjoys wearing overalls and hunting and shooting with her brother, Paul. Even so, to underline her uncertain gender identity, when Miranda and Paul find the silver dove and the gold ring in the old family graves, she suddenly feels the temptation represented by the wedding ring as a symbol of the traditional Southern female experience: the kind of experience which shaped Grandmother's life first as a Southern belle and then as a Southern lady and which she had tried to perpetuate through the rules and education she had imposed on her grandchildren.

32 Most critics have focused on the question of gender when dealing with Miranda's growing up because Porter's primary interest in the Miranda stories is placed on the main character's construction of her gender identity rather than on her racial identity. There is nonetheless evidence that both processes are subtly connected in Miranda's progress towards "knowledge." Thus, although Miranda's transformation into a tomboy is an overt expression of the gender confusion and instability which characterizes her identity as a girl, it also contains a covert reference to the collapse of the racial order which the new Nannie evinces in "The Last Leaf."

33 Miranda's tomboyism can be seen as a manifestation of the collapse of the traditional image of the Southern lady, but this collapse is a result of the symbolic absence not only of her white Grandmother but also of her black mammy. As in the case of the stereotypical Mammy in *Gone with the Wind*, who according to Manring "has no real function beyond maintaining white Southern ladyhood" (39), during Grandmother's life Aunt Nannie's alliance with the standards of white ladyhood was undeniable, so we may conclude that Miranda loses her sponsor in the female experience of white ladyhood twice, first when Grandmother dies, and then when Aunt Nannie leaves to become "an aged Bantu woman of independent means." Aunt Nannie thus contributes to the white children's confused interpretation of race relationships by exposing the gaps separating her two identities: the mammie, who "had seemed so contented and wantless," and the black woman, who "had always liked and hoped to own certain things" (*CS* 349). By so doing, she exposes the instability which shakes the traditional gender roles in Miranda's experience.

34 At the beginning of "The Fig Tree," as Miranda's mammy, Nannie forces the girl to wear a bonnet instead of a hat to symbolically protect the whiteness of her skin; she grips her with her knees to hold Miranda as she brushes her hair or buttons her dress:

> a habit of gripping with her knees to hold Miranda while she brushed her hair or buttoned her dress down the back. When Miranda wriggled, Aunt Nannie squeezed still harder, and Miranda wriggled more, but never enough to get away. Aunt Nannie gathered up Miranda's scalp lock firmly, snapped a rubber band around it, jammed a freshly starched white chambray bonnet over her ears and forehead, fastened the crown to the lock with a large safety pin, and said: "Got to hold you still someways. Here now, don't you take this off your head till the sun go down." (*CS* 352)

35 Aunt Nannie's acts of repression to bring Miranda up as a white lady are more than evident in the previous passage. In contrast, in "The Last Leaf," the same Nannie is portrayed as a living symbol of idleness, calm and freedom while she sits on the doorstep in "serene idleness," "breathing the free air" (*CS* 349): now Aunt Nannie's message, that is "the lesson [that] sank in as the years went on and Nannie continued to sit on the doorstep of her cabin" (*CS* 349) has nothing to do with the repression and the restrictions associated with Miranda's education as a future Southern lady in "The Fig Tree"... Quite on the contrary, Nannie's lesson has changed to denounce the distortion of the human identity and the perversion of the human self brought about by the myth of the Old South and its masks which affect both blacks and whites. Like Sophia Jane in the past when she started nursing one of her babies, now Nannie seems to become aware of the fact that she had also been "badly cheated" by the old order (*CS* 334). Nonetheless, in contrast with her mistress, who suspended her submission to the old order temporarily and eventually chose to push truth aside, Aunt Nannie's attitude functions as a permanent lesson for Miranda and the other children.

36 The lesson on race and race relationships that Nannie represents in "The Last Leaf" involves the collapse of her mammy image and consequently the white children's loss of their black mammy. It seems that in Miranda's case, this loss complicates her ascension to the pedestal of white ladyhood since one of the tasks of her black mammy had been her indoctrination with the traditional Southern ideology and her training as a Southern lady. As soon as Nannie starts "sitting on the steps, breathing the free air" (*CS* 349) and symbolically stops "gripping with her knees to hold Miranda" (*CS* 352), the girl becomes free to wriggle and use a hat instead of a bonnet, which implies a loosening of the protection and of the repression required to preserve the unnatural immaculate whiteness associated with the myth and the mask of the Southern lady. Thus Nannie's liberation from the restrictions of her mammy mask contributes to the interruption of the process of Miranda's education as a lady and probably propitiates her tomboyism, which represents the first step in her unconscious development towards knowledge: thanks to Aunt Nannie's lesson Miranda can at least intuit the truth about race and race relations in the South, and come closer to a more accurate understanding of her female sexuality by leaving aside the lady image.

37 The second aspect of Miranda's tomboyism is especially evident in "The Grave," a story where Aunt Nannie is not even mentioned. In spite of this, the temporal references suggest its chronological proximity—or even its simultaneity—to "The Last Leaf": if the latter records Aunt Nannie's development after Grandmother's death, the former starts just after Grandmother has died, when "part of her land was to be sold for the benefit of certain of her children, and the cemetery happened to lie in the part set aside for sale," so "[i]t was necessary to take up the bodies and bury them again [...]" (*CS* 362). This temporal coincidence corroborates the idea that Miranda, the tomboy who in "The Grave" is "wearing her summer roughing outfit: dark blue overalls, a light blue shirt, a hired-man's straw hat, and thick brown sandals" (*CS* 364) is one of the children who witness Aunt Nannie's metamorphosis in "The Last Leaf" and who, as a result, are left without a mammy figure in their lives. As suggested above, this absence contributes to the dismantling of Miranda's bringing up as a lady, a process which culminates in "The Grave" when Miranda, facing a pregnant she-rabbit which has just been shot dead by her brother Paul, affirms "I know, [...] like kittens; I know, like babies" (*CS* 367), thus connecting animal and human experiences of pregnancy and sexuality. Consequently,

she acknowledges the existence of a more natural interpretation of female sexuality and of the experience of womanhood than the one which she had learnt from her Grandmother supported by her black mammy, and which she had evoked when she was wearing the wedding ring in the first part of the story.

38 Furthermore, the fact that Aunt Nannie's liberation from the mammy mask in "The Last Leaf" may covertly favor or propitiate Miranda's development towards the kind of knowledge which she intuits in the scene of the pregnant she-rabbit is symbolically announced in "The Fig Tree" when Nannie, still wearing her mammy mask, offers Miranda figs from the fig tree, that is, from the tree of knowledge. At that stage, Miranda is too young and too much under Grandmother's influence to accept the figs which traditionally symbolize the female womb and the sexual awareness resulting from the human Fall. In "The Grave," with the help provided by Aunt Nannie's lesson and her new symbolic alliance with knowledge, Miranda seems ready to go a step further in her own progress towards knowledge.

39 After Grandmother's death the attitude of Nannie, who as a (black) mammy had apparently blindly contributed to the promotion of the race and gender roles sanctioned by the ideology of the old order, becomes an important contribution not only to Miranda's discovery of her sexuality but also to her intuition of the truth about race relations in the South. In both Aunt Nannie's and Miranda's cases, Grandmother's decease triggers the process which causes first a crack and then the collapse of the masks or the roles which had defined the experience of both black and white womanhood in the old order: the mammy image and the lady image. Miranda, as her name suggests, is always eager to see, and after Grandmother dies she is offered the chance to peep through these cracks and see what lies behind to discover the flaws and inconsistencies of both race and gender relationships in the Old South. References to Miranda's initiation as a process of discovery of her female sexuality in contrast with the image of the Southern lady are central in "The Old Order," but the story also hints at the artificiality of race relations in the Old South and at how they may have affected Miranda's development especially after Grandmother's death. Miranda's tomboyism is evidently a manifestation of her state of uncertainty concerning her gender identity, but this uncertainty is undeniably promoted by the new attitude shown by old Aunt Nannie as a consequence of the symbolic loosening of the brackets that had defined her as a "(black)" mammy all along Grandmother's life. Although Miranda's tomboyism in "The Old Order" is not so prominently portrayed as that of Frankie Addams in Carson McCullers's *The Member of the Wedding* (1946) or Scout Finch in Harper Lee's *To Kill a Mockingbird* (1960), the role of Aunt Nannie in Miranda's development announces the relevance achieved by the two African American domestics, Berenice and Calpurnia, in Frankie's and Scout's growing up process respectively.

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NOTES

1. Old Aunt Jemima was originally a character in a minstrel show performed by the blackface comedy team of Baker and Farrell. For more information on the genesis of this image, see Manring 60-78.

2. Both Fox-Genovese and Hale analyze the peculiarities of the plantation household as a space of both consumption and production, in contrast with the middle-class home characterized almost exclusively as a space of consumption easily distinguishable from the public sphere and its eminently productive capacity (Fox-Genovese 60-82; Hale 88-93).

3. Most scholars see Grandmother as representative of the Southern past in the Miranda stories and as a symbol of the prevalence of the old order in Miranda's childhood education even if Grandmother herself experienced the flaws and inconsistencies of the system especially during her adolescence and youth (Brinkmeyer 150-55, 162-65; DeMouy 116, 119-26, 136-37; Hardy 15-18, 40; Machann & Clark 92-93; Nance 80-83, 88-100, 107, 114; Stout 191-92, 134-35; Tanner 65, 69-74, 75-76; Unrue 30-31, 46-48).

4. Porter published "The Old Order" as a sequence of six short stories and sketches in *The Leaning Tower and other Stories* in 1944, although most of the sections which constitute this sequence had been originally published independently between 1935 and 1936: "The Witness" and "The Last Leaf" were published in January 1935; "The Grave" in April 1935; "The Circus" in July 1935; and "The Journey" in the winter of 1936. Only one of the stories was published for the first time later than 1936: "The Source" in 1941. The seventh story to be incorporated in "The Old Order" was "The Fig Tree": according to DeMouy "The Fig Tree" was written in 1929 but it was not published until June 1960 (215), and then incorporated in this sequence in 1965 for its publication in *The Collected Stories* (115).

5. Hereafter I shall use the abbreviation *CS* to refer to Katherine Anne Porter's *Collected Stories* in which "The Old Order" is reprinted.

ABSTRACTS

Les nouvelles que Katherine Anne Porter consacre au personnage de Miranda ont été généralement interprétées comme l'expression d'une tentative de l'auteure de déconstruire le mythe du Vieux Sud. Elle présente les expériences de Miranda, une petite fille blanche qui grandit dans le Sud à la fin du XIX[e] siècle. La vie de Miranda est principalement déterminée par le mythe de la dame blanche du Sud que représente sa grand-mère. C'est probablement la raison pour laquelle le traitement de la Mammy noire et son rôle dans le développement de l'enfant a reçu peu d'attention. Pourtant, en recréant l'image de la Mammy au travers d'Aunt Nannie, Porter révèle ses inquiétudes quant aux effets destructeurs sous-jacents à ces relations interraciales. En outre, Aunt Nannie change tout au long de la série, passant de la "faithful old servant" à la "Bantu woman of independent means" – évolution qui peut être mise en parallèle avec celle de Miranda qui adopte, après le décès de sa grand-mère, une attitude de garçon manqué. Ce changement semble indiquer un degré important d'insécurité à l'égard des rôles traditionnels relatifs à la question du genre et de la race.

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